

June 21, 2007: Eye on Pakistan - The Washington Times

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Washington Times, June 21, 2007

By Felice D. Gaer and Michael Cromartie

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice met this week in Washington with Pakistani Foreign Minister Khurshid M. Kasuri, underlining U.S. support for the Pakistani government. Ironically, while the United States is working with Pakistan as part of its broader national security strategy to combat terrorism, the Pakistani government has not only cut a deal with radical Islamist parties, but also perpetuated abuses of religious freedom and other human rights of its citizens, strengthening the very extremists who incite participation in terror activity. Additionally, Pakistan reportedly has provided safe haven to Taliban leaders and fighters who cross into Afghanistan.

It's not just Afghanistan that stands to suffer, of course, but Pakistanis themselves. The alliance between the Musharraf government and the Muttahida Majlis-e-Ammal, a coalition of six Islamist political parties, gives inordinate influence to these extremist groups and has seriously compromised freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief in Pakistan. The Pakistani government commits abuses in the form of laws violating the rights of the Ahmadis, a minority community of heterodox Muslims, the persistent sectarian violence targeting Shi'ite Muslims, Hindus, Christians and Ahmadis, and the Hudood ordinances, which violate the rights of women in Pakistan.

Among the most persistent and insidious instruments of abuse of religious human rights and civil liberties are Pakistan's blasphemy laws, used to punish anyone who has allegedly defamed Islam. Prescribed criminal penalties for blasphemy include life imprisonment and the death penalty. Blasphemy allegations, which are commonly false, result in the lengthy detention of, and sometimes violence against, Ahmadis, Christians, Hindus and members of other religious minorities, as well as Muslims on account of their religious beliefs. Because they neither require proof of intent nor carry any penalty for leveling false allegations, the blasphemy laws are easily used as tools of intimidation and revenge. Often those acquitted of blasphemy have been forced into hiding due to fears of vigilante violence. According to media reports, a Pakistani blasphemy suspect was stabbed to death on his way to court in police custody a year ago, the day after a mob killed a schoolteacher trying to save a blasphemy suspect under attack.

Just last month, a court in Lahore passed a death sentence on Younis Masih, a Christian who has been imprisoned for nearly two years. According to reports from a number of Pakistani and international non-governmental organizations, Mr. Masih angered a group of Muslims by expressing concern about the noise level of their gathering at a time when his nephew had died and his body was lying at home. They later accused Mr. Masih of making derogatory remarks about Islam, which, under Pakistani law, constitutes blasphemy.

The sentence against Mr. Masih was followed quickly by another blasphemy allegation against a group of Christian nurses in a hospital in Islamabad. They were accused of drawing lines through some Koranic verses on a hospital notice board, despite the fact that no one saw them do it and one of the people accused was on leave at the time. Another Christian, Martha Bibi, was charged under the blasphemy laws in January.

At least five Ahmadis are in prison on blasphemy charges, according to the State Department. In the past year, even those attempting to defend people accused of blasphemy have themselves been threatened.

The laws' harm is compounded by the lack of due process. Although these laws were amended in October 2004 to reduce charges applied in malice by stipulating that only a senior police official can bring the indictment, the procedural changes have not had a significant effect on the way the blasphemy laws are exploited in Pakistan.

The Pakistani government has also extended its blasphemy laws into the international arena. In March, Pakistan again presented a resolution at the new U.N. Human Rights Council in Geneva supporting measures to halt the "defamation of religions." The resolution's backers claim that their aim is to promote religious tolerance but in practice, such laws routinely criminalize and prosecute what is deemed - often arbitrarily - to be "offensive" or "unacceptable" speech about a

particular religion. Regrettably, the resolution again passed the council.

Potentially even harsher than the blasphemy laws is a proposed bill currently before a parliamentary committee that would impose the death penalty for apostasy, which includes converting from Islam.

The United States should clearly and unequivocally press Pakistan to decriminalize blasphemy and meanwhile implement procedural changes to the blasphemy laws that will reduce and ultimately eliminate their abuse.

The Pakistani government must ensure that those accused of blasphemy and their defenders are given adequate protection, including by investigating death threats and other actions against them carried out by militants, and that full due process is followed in investigations and criminal proceedings.

Finally, the United States should urge the Pakistani government to take more serious steps to combat Islamic extremism in the country.

Repressive measures including Pakistan's abuse of blasphemy laws exacerbate religious tension, violate the rights of Pakistanis and fuel extremism. They have no place in a country the United States considers an ally.

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